



Matter of Trust
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**THE REAL STORY
SAFE SEX PROJECT**

A Matter of Trust

By Jeff Erno

I had a crush on my eighth grade health teacher. I wouldn't have even taken that class, though, if it hadn't been required. The majority of second semester we covered sex education, and believe me, it was embarrassing. As Mr. Myers talked about penises and masturbation and explained

words like erection, ejaculation, and puberty, I felt like he was talking specifically about me, Travis.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not a sex addict or something. I just...well, I do jack off. Don't all guys?

When I started in Mr. Myers' class, and he told us we were gonna be covering sex education the next semester, I started thinking about him, like, all the time. I don't think I

wanted to have sex with him, and that really wasn't even a fantasy of mine. But when I did think about him and visualized him in my mind, it made me super excited. I got really, really hard, and sometimes I even jacked off. When I did, I closed my eyes and thought about what Mr. Myers would look like naked. I wondered if his privates looked like mine. I wondered if he jacked off too.

All that first semester while

we were discussing the respiratory system, memorizing all the bones in the body, and talking about how harmful smoking cigarettes was to a person's health, I was secretly harboring passionate feelings toward Mr. Myers. I loved his smile and dimples. And he had the sexiest voice. My heart beat faster every time I looked at his lean body and broad shoulders, and when he happened to turn around to write on the

blackboard, I had to bite my lower lip. That ass was just so, so sexy.

Sexy? How could I be thinking my *teacher* was sexy? Was it only because he was the one who'd be teaching us about sex? Or was it something more? Was it maybe possible Mr. Myers might feel something for me too? I mean, he was awfully nice to me. He smiled at me and sometimes even winked, and sometimes it even seemed

like he called on me more than he did the other students. On my homework, he wrote me personal notes, and they always made me smile. They were like our own private conversations.

I know how crazy it sounds. An eighth grader shouldn't have a crush on his teacher, especially his *male* teacher. I should never have had those thoughts about his naked body. He was so much older than me, and not only that, he probably

wasn't even gay. He'd kill me if he ever found out my true feelings.

As for me, I hadn't yet made a decision about what I wanted to be—gay, straight, bi, or whatever. It was just mom and me, and she'd always acted like that sort of thing didn't matter. In fact, if I'd have come right out and announced to her I'm gay, she'd probably have been happy about it. Seemed like she had more gay friends than

straight, and even her best friend Caiden was gay. She read all these gay books, too. Romances. It was kinda weird, maybe, but it wasn't like she'd have pushed me in one direction or the other.

When I was in the fourth grade, this new kid David started at our school. Not only was David in my class, but he lived only two blocks from me, so we started to become friends. His dad had

snowmobiles, and during the winter I'd go down to his house and we'd ride together. Sometimes David came over and spent the night at our house, too. We played video games and did a lot of stuff outside. He was more into the rough-and-tumble kinda play. He liked sports and competitive activities, and although I wasn't normally into that sort of thing, I was into David.

We slept together in sleeping bags on the floor because my twin bed was small, and it would have been rude for me to make him sleep on the floor alone. He felt the same way, apparently. And when I woke up in the early hours of the morning while it was still dark, I'd snuggle close to him. He didn't pull away, and when we woke up in the morning we were practically on top of each other, arms

wrapped around one another. It was no big deal; we never talked about it.

My friendship with David didn't last long, though. We were best friends all of that year and partway through the next summer. But once we got into middle school, David started hanging out with the guys who were into sports. We traveled in different social circles, and it felt awkward. I don't know, it was like we both

recognized that we'd been childhood friends but had begun growing up, and we each felt that to pretend we still had that childish friendship would be...well, childish.

But in physical terms, David couldn't accurately be described as childlike. He developed quickly, his upper body toning up with defined pectorals and noticeable biceps. And he had that classic v-shaped torso with a narrow

waist and tight, lean abdominals. I, on the other hand, was slender and average. I wasn't by any means fat, but I wasn't muscular either. Going into the eighth grade, David was almost a foot taller than me, and he'd already started going out with girls.

That particular relationship sparked feelings and questions inside me—questions about who I was and why I thought about the things I did. Like, one

day in August of that year, right before school started, my friend Traci called and invited me to the beach with her and her mom. They picked me up, and I crawled into the backseat. To my surprise, David sat in the seat next to me. He lived close to Traci, and they'd offered him a ride. David wore a form fitting tee shirt, probably a size or two small on him, and basketball shorts. I looked down at his long legs, spread

wide apart in order to fit comfortably in the tiny backseat. That's when I knew David wasn't a boy anymore. His body had changed; his legs were muscular and covered with a thin layer of hair. My heart beat so fast in my chest I thought I'd hyperventilate. We didn't speak other than to say hi to each other. And when we got to the beach, David took off and hung out with his own friends. I knew from that point

forward that our friendship was over.

The awkward, self-conscious feeling I experienced on the way to the beach with David became familiar to me. I started to feel that way about a lot of guys. I felt a strange mixture of embarrassment and envy, and I wondered why some guys were so lucky that they just naturally developed attractive, toned bodies while other guys like me remained average. I tried to

stay active, do exercises and not eat a lot of junk food. Although I technically remained “fit”, I never became hot looking. Not like David. Not like the other jocks at school. And not like Mr. Myers.

By January of my eighth grade year, I pretty much had figured out who I was. I still didn't talk about it, not even to my mom or my best friend Traci. But I finally got to a point where I could look back on my

childhood and put the pieces together. Certainly David had been my biggest crush, but before him I'd liked Todd. Then before that I was really close to Steve. There'd always been one specific male friend I'd felt really close to. Other than that one boy, all my friends were girls.

In grade school I played with the girls at recess. Jump rope and House. Then I'd become friends with that one

special boy and hang out with him exclusively, but my fall back always remained the group of girls. As I got older and started middle school, I had a lot more girl friends than guy friends. And the girls seemed to always talk about one thing—the guys.

I remembered the dolls and Easy Bake ovens and how my friend Traci and I used to play dress up in my mom's closet with all her old clothes. Traci

included me in her tea parties, and we did crafts together. I even learned how to knit and crochet a little bit.

So when I added up all the evidence, circumstantial though it may have been, I concluded that the odds were I might be gay. The female friends. The boy crushes. The wet dreams and fantasies about Mr. Myers. And of course, David's masculine, hairy legs in the backseat of Traci's Subaru.

The semester began on our first day back from Winter Break. Everyone bragged about the cool things they got for Christmas. A lot of kids had new shoes or new clothes. There were zillions of fancy new cell phones they weren't allowed to use during class, and no one seemed to be all that concerned about the new class schedules.

I must've been the only student worried about sex ed.

To everyone else it seemed more like a joke, and the remarks I heard from my classmates indicated they all pretty much thought the class was stupid and unnecessary. They all seemed to already know everything they needed to know. In my gym class locker room the guys already talked about blow jobs and fucking girls. They constantly called each other faggot, like it was the biggest put down in

the world.

But that day, when Mr. Myers called our class to order, he completely ignored and dismissed the snickering and laughter that came from the back of the room. He handled himself in a professional, matter-of-fact sort of manner, and let all of us know that the topics we'd be discussing were serious business.

And then he called on me. "Travis, will you help me pass

out these handouts?”

Of course, nobody noticed he'd singled me out—picked me to be his helper—when he could have selected any one of the other twenty-four students. I noticed, though, and I noticed the warm smile on his face when he handed me the stack of booklets. I took a deep breath to calm myself and rationalized the situation. He'd selected me, I reasoned, not because he particularly liked

me, but because I was sitting in the front row.

It's kind of strange, because generally speaking I'm not the front-row kinda student. In all my other classes I made a concerted effort *not* to end up in the front. Now being in the very back was almost as bad as sitting up front because teachers all seemed to assume the cut ups and troublemakers took the back row. So I generally tried to sit in the

middle and just blend in. In health class, though, I sat front and center, merely feet from Mr. Myers's desk.

I finished passing out the sex education booklets and had three or four copies left over. I took one for myself and handed the rest back to Mr. Myers, who was now standing in the front of the room addressing the class, just a few inches from my desk. As I slid down in my seat, I started to look up at him, but

my gaze lingered momentarily just below the teacher's waist. He had one hand in his pocket, and the material of his khaki slacks stretched tightly over his...um, well...his private parts.

I stared for a few seconds, then realized how absurd I was being. My pulse quickened just a bit, but I did my best to conceal my reaction, and moved my gaze upward to take in the rest of his body. As I

looked up I caught something from the corner of my eye and quickly turned my head to the left. Another student, Jeremy Loper, sat in the next row, one seat back, and he was staring at me. He must've seen me looking at Mr. Myers. Jeremy smiled at me, then winked.

Oh. My. God. I was so mortified! I felt the heat enflame my cheeks, and I looked down at my desk as I squirmed in my seat,

embarrassed. Mr. Myers continued with his opening lecture, telling us how normal it was to experience changes. He talked about girls getting their periods and boys getting erections. He talked about breasts and pubic hair and said that all this stuff was normal.

I couldn't concentrate on anything specific he was saying because I feared Jeremy was staring at me. I wouldn't even look up at Mr. Myers anymore

because Jeremy might notice. My gaze might accidentally linger a little too long.

Those fifty minutes seemed the longest of my life, and when the bell finally rang, I quickly gathered my belongings and headed out the door. I dashed down the hall, not looking back, and headed straight for the cafeteria.

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I stood in front of the full-length mirror in my bedroom, mentally preparing myself for the first day of my sophomore year. So much about me had changed over the previous two years, but unfortunately my appearance had not altered all that much. I remained average looking, a tiny bit taller and more slender. Luckily, I somehow managed to avoid the plague of teenage acne that

many of my friends seemed to battle constantly. I hated my thick black hair and kept it cut short with a crest at the top.

I wished I could've been born blond like Jeremy. I loved his wavy locks of golden hair and his bright blue, penetrating eyes. During that semester back in eighth grade, we never did confront each other, and thus he never said a word about seeing me stare at Myers' bulge. But as the weeks

progressed, I noticed him staring a few times himself. Once was when Mr. Myers had bent over to pick up an eraser.

In the ninth grade, Jeremy and I took gym together. Not on purpose, we just happened to end up in the same class. Since we recognized each other from middle school, and since neither one of us were jocks, we sort of gravitated toward each other. During free periods, Jeremy and I would find one

another and bounce a basketball back and forth.

I kept waiting for him say something about our sex ed class, but he never did. I no longer had a crush on Mr. Myers and actually felt a bit embarrassed about it, but I'd come a long way in acknowledging who I was. During that summer, I came out to my mom, and as I'd expected, she gave me her full support. Then I told Traci, and

all she said to me was “pass the ketchup”. I guess she’d already figured it out.

Being out to my mom and best friend is one thing, but being out at school is quite another. I wasn’t ready back in the ninth grade to tell anyone I was gay. I didn’t want to be the school’s poster child for gay rights, and I definitely wasn’t brave enough to risk the potential bullying and ridicule I might face by being so open.

So I went that entire year without telling Jeremy. It didn't matter all that much because we weren't even really friends. We just shared a hatred of gym and leaned on each other for moral support. By teaming up, we provided each other cover and didn't get marked for non-participation.

But I'd made a decision that summer. I had to bite the bullet and take a chance. I had to talk to Jeremy and tell him about

myself. Maybe my intuition about him would prove to be correct. Maybe he too was gay...or at least bi. Maybe...or maybe not.

Why I allowed myself to get so worked up about it, I don't know. I hadn't even started the school year yet, and for all I knew Jeremy might not even be there. Even if he were there, I had no way of knowing he'd be interested in continuing our friendship. Cripes, we barely

were friends at all. I didn't even have his number in my cell phone. I hadn't even friended him on Facebook.

But I did know a little about Jeremy, just from our conversations in gym. He was in band and played piano. He went to band camp every summer, and he had two older sisters. We liked a lot of the same music, but he really wasn't that into rap. We both played some of the same video

games.

That was enough, wasn't it? We had a few things in common, and we seemed to get along just fine. Why couldn't a guy like him be my friend? Memories of elementary flooded my mind. I didn't want this to be David all over again. I didn't want my feelings for Jeremy to develop in another silly crush where I obsessed over him and yearned for something more than

friendship. I didn't want that pattern to continue.

Yet wasn't I already doing it? Staring into the mirror, assessing myself and daydreaming about Jeremy, I obsessed. I thought about his smile and how his eyes seemed to light up. He had a smooth voice that sounded at least an octave deeper than mine. When he laughed, he tilted his head slightly to the side, and I couldn't help but laugh right

along with him, even if I didn't think anything was funny.

Throughout the summer I'd thought about him. I thought about asking him why he winked at me that day when he saw me checking out Mr. Myers' package. I thought about telling him I'd noticed him doing some checking out of his own. But what if I was wrong? What if Jeremy's smile and wink had nothing to do with Mr. Myers? What if he just

had something in his eye or I just imagined it all?

I wore my coolest new shirt and skinny jeans, and donned my favorite pair of kicks—my red and white Vans. Mom had gotten me a bottle of Guilty cologne as one of my stocking stuffers for Christmas the year before, and I'd barely had a chance to use any of it. So I splashed some on, then checked my hair and teeth for the umpteenth time. I picked

up my backpack and raced down the stairs, determined not to waste another second worrying, but by the time I got to the edge of the sidewalk, I already started to think about him again. I was a basket case.

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I thought the bus was chaotic until I arrived at school. The hallway teemed with

activity as students scurried to their homerooms, stopping multiple times to hug, high-five, or simply say “wassup” to friends they hadn’t seen for a couple months. I’d texted Traci already and knew we’d be in the same homeroom, so I zig-zagged my way through the crowd until I located the correct class.

Once inside, I discovered Traci already at her seat, so I slid into the desk in front of her

that she'd saved for me. I spun around in my seat to face her. "Hey, what a zoo out there," I said.

"Tell me about it." Traci looked up at me and smiled, her round face cherub-like. We'd been friends all our lives, and she knew me better than anyone. But she didn't know everything. She didn't know how I felt about Jeremy.

"Let me see your schedule," she said.

I reached into my backpack and retrieved my itinerary of classes, handing it to her. She placed it on the desk beside hers and compared our schedules. “We have three classes together,” she said excitedly.

Yeah, we’d planned it that way last year at the end of the semester when we selected our classes. Of course she wouldn’t remember. Sometimes she was such an airhead. “Go figure,” I

said sarcastically. I looked up, over Traci's head, and instantly froze. My heartbeat quickened and my mouth went dry as I saw who'd just walked through the door.

Jeremy.

And he was hotter than ever. Although I hadn't changed all that much over the summer, he certainly had. His gorgeous blond hair was cut and styled differently, and I swear he was at least three or

four inches taller than I remembered. Though technically he was a band geek, he didn't fit the stereotype. With his skintight skinny jeans and trim cut polo, he looked fine. Real fine.

Traci turned in her chair to see what I was staring at, then turned back around, her expression twisted with confusion. She knit her brow and grabbed hold of my wrist. "Travis, are you okay?"

“Uh, yeah,” I said, shaking my head to free myself from my trancelike state. “Yeah, fine.”

“Um, hmmm. You look like you just saw a ghost or something.”

“No, I, um, just didn’t recognize Jeremy at first.” At that moment Jeremy made his way down the aisle, scanning for an empty desk. As he approached me, he nodded, then slipped into the seat next

to me.

“You’re not saving this for someone, are you?” he asked.

I shook my head but didn’t speak.

“Hi, Jeremy,” Traci blurted out.

He turned to her and smiled. “Hey, Traci. Have a good summer?”

“Fuck no,” she whispered. “Too damn short.”

“I hear ya. What about

you?" He looked directly at me, still flashing his pearly whites.

"Um, yeah." I gulped and shifted nervously in my chair just as the bell sounded. The teacher then called the class to order and began taking attendance.

I didn't make any attempt to further communicate with Jeremy for the remainder of homeroom. We were just there for fifteen minutes, for attendance and locker

assignments, and then we'd be off to our first period classes.

When the bell sounded, I shot out of my desk without even saying goodbye to Traci and headed out the door to find my locker. I knew I'd see Traci again in a couple minutes during first period, but mainly I had to get away from Jeremy.

The entire plan to talk to him and ask him out was a no go. There was no fucking way I could do it, not with him

looking like that. I could barely even open my mouth to speak to him, let alone ask him out.

It took me a couple tries to get the combination on my locker to work, then I unzipped my backpack and removed the pens and notebook I'd need for my next class. I hadn't received any textbooks yet, but I'd get them once the classes had started. I pushed the locker closed and turned around, ready to head out to first period

Geometry when I came face to face with Jeremy. Again. He was standing in front of me, apparently waiting to speak.

“Oh...um, sorry,” I said, as I’d nearly plowed into him.

“It’s cool. Hey, Travis, I wanted to ask you something.”

“Uh, okay,” I said. I felt my cheeks getting hot. I looked down at the ground momentarily, then forced myself to look up into his blue eyes. “Sure.”

“I just, um...well, I wondered if you might wanna hang out sometime. Like, after school or something.”

Had I been swallowed up by a black hole that transported me to the Twilight Zone? Did Jeremy Loper just ask me, Travis McDonald, to hang out with him?

“Y-y-yeah. Uh, sure...why not?”

“Cool,” he said, then shrugged his shoulders. We

stared at each other for a moment, neither knowing what to say next. Then he shook his head and pulled out his phone. "Let's exchange numbers."

"Oh, right." I retrieved my phone from my pocket and handed it to him.

We each typed in our number to the other's contact list then looked at one another. "Where you headed?" he asked.

“Geometry?”

“Oh, darn. I’ve got English first period. We should’ve coordinated schedules.”

“Yeah.” I felt like such a dork, not knowing what to say next. “Well, I better get going.”

“Lunch?” he asked.

“I have first lunch period.”

“Damn, I have second.”

“Oh. Well...you can call me...or, um, text or something. If you want.”

“I do,” he said. “I do want.” He’d taken a step back, heading down the hall in the opposite direction, but still stared at me. “And those jeans...they’re awesome.”

I looked down at myself, then back up at his face. “Thanks,” I said. “Yours too.”

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Sitting on my bed, I looked down at my lap where my

phone lay. I picked it up and began to type a text, then backspaced until it was deleted — my sixth attempt. No matter how I tried to start the conversation, it sounded stupid. Maybe I should just say “hi” and wait for him to reply. No, because then he’d just say “hi” back, and it’d be on me to think of what to say. I could ask him how his first day had gone. I could say I was thinking of him.

No, no. It was all just too corny. I flopped back on the bed, sighing as I grabbed one of the pillows. I buried my face into it and screamed, then felt even more stupid. Jeremy had looked so good today—better than good. He looked fine, and I don't just mean fine, I mean *fine*.

I reached down and rubbed myself, painfully aware of my arousal. This wasn't my first time becoming aroused while

thinking of Jeremy. At least now, after a full semester of sex ed, I knew it was normal for guys my age to get erections and even to masturbate. And I knew that my masturbatory fantasies exclusively featured other guys, and I was fine with that. But when I thought about a specific person, like Jeremy, it just felt so intimate, much different than visualizing a movie star or famous athlete or something.

As I unbuttoned my pants, my phone buzzed, startling me. I picked it up and looked at the screen.

Jeremy!

He said hi and asked what was up.

“Hey,” I replied, “nothing, just doing homework.”

“Already? On your first day?”

It was a lie, of course. I didn't have any homework yet.

“A little,” I lied again. “You?”

I waited for a few seconds, anticipating his reply. “Just thinking of you.”

“Really?” My heart raced. I couldn't believe he'd just said that. “Like what?”

I thought I would die when I read his response a few seconds later. “Like how I caught you looking at Myers back in 8th grade sex ed.”

Fuck!

“How embarrassing.”

“I know, right? Me too, though. He was fine. For an old guy.” Mr. Myers was like thirty or something.

That confirmed it! Jeremy admitted he'd been checking out our male teacher. That meant...well, at least he was bi, maybe gay. I didn't know what to say.

“Can I call you?” he texted after a few seconds.

Crap!

“Sure.”

We talked for two hours and probably would have stayed on the phone longer if mom hadn't called me for dinner. Though we'd spoken to each other hundreds of times before, for the first time, we *really* talked, and about a lot more things than just being gay.

Actually, we barely covered the gay thing. Jeremy teased me for being so obvious back in the eighth grade when I had

my crush on Mr. Myers. He said every girl in school was in love with Myers. And most of the gay boys, I added. We agreed he was the perfect person to teach sex ed.

After dinner I called Jeremy back, and we decided to hang out the next night after school. And that's how it all started for us.

We stayed in Jeremy's room playing video games the first time we hung out. He told me his sister knew he was gay, but he hadn't come out to his folks yet. When he introduced me to his mom, he said we were friends.

And it was true. Jeremy and I were just friends at that point, and nothing even happened during that first visit. Well, nothing really earth shattering.

We were sitting beside each other on the floor playing Call of Duty, and his leg brushed against mine. I pulled away, thinking it was accidental, but a few seconds later, he was rubbing against me again. I didn't bother to move away the second time, but it seemed time had stood still. I could barely concentrate on the game as my pulse quickened with anticipation. I wanted him to touch me, and I wanted to

touch him. I wanted to reach down and slide my hand along the side of his inner thigh. I wanted to run my fingers beneath his tee shirt and up his tight abdomen, and caress his hard chest. If only I had the nerve to make that first move, there was no telling how far we'd go.

But nothing else happened, and Jeremy and I just talked. We discussed our classes and Jeremy admitted that although

he did well in English, his math skills sucked. I offered to help him with his classes because math's my favorite subject.

"You can come over and meet my mom, and we'll do geometry together."

"You sure?" he asked. "I mean, I didn't call you cause I wanted a tutor."

"No, it's cool. We can play COD on our big screen TV."

He came over that Friday, and that's when we held hands

for the first time, but still no kiss. I started to wonder if maybe I would have to make the first move. When Jeremy left that night, he texted me after he got home. That led to a phone call, and we talked till one in the morning.

Saturday he called and said his sister was going to the mall and wondered if I wanted to go to a movie with him. I couldn't believe he invited me. Didn't that mean we were going on

our first date? I changed clothes six times before he arrived to pick me up.

We picked a scary movie, which was cool because it gave me an excuse to snuggle and hold his hand. My heart beat so rapidly, I wasn't sure if it was from fear of the killer in the movie or nervousness about Jeremy touching me. Afterward, we walked back to my place where we'd wait till my mom came home so she

could give him a ride.

“Let’s go to my room,” I suggested.

“Okay.”

I headed across the living room toward the hallway, but Jeremy just stood there. I stopped and turned to look at him. “Come on,” I said. “Uh, you okay?”

“Come ‘ere,” he said, his voice merely a whisper.

At first I froze, uncertain

what was going on. Was he pissed at me? He didn't look angry, though. Far from it. I moved closer to him, smiling. "What?" I whispered.

He reached out and took hold of my shoulders, staring right into my eyes, then leaned toward me and pressed his lips to mine. I melted into his embrace, my heart pounding and my arousal throbbing as I allowed every one of my senses to be overtaken. He smelled so

heavenly, and the taste of his kiss was like popcorn and breath mints. I felt his hands on my back, holding and caressing me.

“I wanted to do that for so long,” he said.

“We could still do it in the bedroom,” I said, giggling.

“I know, but...well, for the past three days it seems every time I’ve gotten up the nerve to go for it and kiss you, you get busy doing something, or you

pull away. It's like, I didn't know..."

"If I wanted you to make the first move?"

He nodded.

"I can't believe you've been thinking about it that long."

"I was thinking about it a long time before that," he said. "I've been thinking bout it for like two years."

"Really?" I smiled. I then grabbed hold of him and kissed

him back, passionately. All the feelings and fantasies I'd harbored for so long went into that kiss as the electricity from his touch surged through my body. When at last I pulled back, he gasped for air. "Does that answer your question?" I asked.

"Uh...what question?" He grinned at me.

"If I wanted you to make the first move."

"You really know how to

kiss," he said. "Have you been practicing?"

"Yeah, with my hand." I held up a fist and pretended to make out with it.

"Is that the only thing you practice with your hand?" he teased.

I blushed.

We kissed a lot more that afternoon while waiting for Mom to get home, and although Jeremy excited me and I became obviously

aroused, we didn't take things any further. In a way, I felt disappointed, but on the other hand, I felt relieved. I felt ready for kissing but didn't know for sure about the other stuff. I mean, sure, I wanted to go further, but only when the time was right.

After we dropped Jeremy off at his house, Mom gave me the embarrassing "talk." *The* talk. The one about birds and bees, penises and vaginas

(although the va-jay-jay part didn't really apply in my case).

“Mom, I had sex ed. Remember?”

“I know, I know.” I was glad we were in the car with her driving so she couldn't look me in the eye and see how utterly mortified I was at that moment. I stared out my window, sliding over as close to the door as possible. “There's nothing to be embarrassed about, Travis,” she said.

“Uh...yeah, there is. You’re my mom, and like, guys don’t talk to their moms about this stuff.”

“Maybe not most guys, but we’ve always been close, honey. And you know you can tell me anything.”

“I know, but just because I can doesn’t mean I will. Or *should*.”

“Well, can we at least talk about safety? You know to use condoms, right?”

I quickly raised both hands to my ears, inserting my index fingers. “La, la, la, la! I’m not hearing this!”

“Travis!”

“Mom, please. Yes, I know about all that stuff, but, like... we just started dating, and Jeremy...well, he hasn’t done anything, other than kiss me.”

“Aw,” she gasped, then smiled. “Your first kiss.”

“Mom, please stop.” I rolled my eyes.

“Honey!” she reached across the seat and patted my thigh. “My baby’s growing up.”

“Mom!” I said, a little louder.

“Sweetheart, I’m not trying to embarrass you. I just need to know you’re prepared. Maybe you’re not ready for more than kissing right now, and frankly, I’m glad. You’re only fifteen, and I hope you wait until you’re absolutely sure you’re ready before becoming sexually

active. But when it happens, it might happen quickly. If you're not ready and committed to being safe..."

"I just might get swept up in the heat of passion or something?" I asked sarcastically.

"Yes! Baby, yes, that's exactly what could happen. And you know I love you with all my heart. I don't want you putting yourself at risk. We're not just talking about

unwanted pregnancies here. We're talking HIV and AIDS, matters of life and death."

"I know, I know. But Mom, seriously...Jeremy's probably a virgin too. Why's it matter?"

She pulled into the drive and shifted into park, then turned to me. "Honey, that's an assumption. You have no idea what another person's sexual history is."

"Well, I could just ask him."

"Travis, it's not just sexual

history you need to be concerned about. Some babies are born with HIV. And even if you and Jeremy are both absolutely certain you don't have HIV, it's just a good habit to practice safe sex."

"Why?"

"Because the next time someone tells you they're negative, it may or may not be true. If you practice safe sex with everyone, you don't have to worry about it."

“That just seems silly, Mom. I mean, yeah I get that it’s important to be safe. But what about trust?”

“If you really respect your partner, you’d never expect them to simply trust you about something like this,” she said.

I shrugged. “It doesn’t matter right now,” I said. “So please, stop worrying. Look, I know about this stuff, and I know where to get condoms.”

“Honey, please promise

me...”

“I promise, Mom,” I said. She took hold of my hand. “Can I go in the house now?”

She leaned across the seat and kissed me on the cheek, then ran her fingers gently through my hair. “Yes, baby. You can go in the house.”

The next day, I found a jumbo pack of condoms on my dresser along with a tube of water-based lubricant.

* * * * *

Jeremy said it always sucked having a birthday so close to Christmas because everyone overlooked it. When he was younger, his parents always threw him a party and made sure they celebrated his birthday exclusively, but as he got older, it became less important. This year, though, he didn't care his big day was only two days before

Christmas. He'd be sixteen, which meant one major thing—driver's license!

For the previous two months both of us had worked on completing our driver's education courses, and we each had our permits. I'd have to wait until my birthday in February, though, to get my license. I wasn't jealous of Jeremy. Well, not much. We spent so much time together, it really didn't matter which of us

got our license first.

“It’ll be sort of like our first real date,” Jeremy said. We sat together on the living room sofa. I lay my head on his shoulder and snuggled close to him.

“We’ll have to wait till after Christmas,” I said. “We can’t go out that night. That’s your party, and the next night is Christmas Eve. Everything’s closed.”

“We can go to a movie on

Christmas night," he suggested.

"Maybe, but it might be weird. I always spend Christmas night with Mom, and I'm not sure we want her tagging along on our date."

He laughed. "I see how you are."

"No, wait. Jeremy, it's not like that. Honest. If you want me to cancel plans with my mom, you know I will. It's just..."

"I'm just teasing," he said,

then kissed me.

“I want to give you something really special for your birthday,” I said.

“Oh?”

“I can give it to you now or wait till the 26th?”

Jeremy grinned. “Babe, you’re tempting me.”

I slid my hand onto his leg and inched it closer to his groin. “You want a hint?”

His mouth opened slightly,

then he gulped and nodded.
“Uh, sure.”

I slid my hand the rest of the way up, resting it against his now-swelling bulge. I then used my palm to apply pressure.

“Oh shit,” he said, his voice breathy. We’d made a decision to wait, to not pressure each other until the time was right for both of us. I didn’t want to wait any longer.

“You don’t mean...?”

I looked up at him and nodded. “We’ve been going out for over three months.”

“I know, but...Travis.” He leaned toward me and gave me a chaste kiss on the lips. “I want the timing to be right for both of us.”

“We’ve already jacked off together,” I reminded him. “And stuff like that.”

“Yeah...and...”

“What better time than your birthday...?”

He pushed himself up from his seat and stepped away from the sofa. Startled, I looked up at him, not sure what was wrong. “Jeremy?”

“Travis, I have to tell you something.”

He wasn't looking at me but instead had stepped over to the sliding-glass window and was staring out at the patio. Something was wrong, and a wave of fear washed over me. He had bad news, and I wasn't

sure I was ready to hear it.

“You don’t want...”

“No! No, Travis, it’s not that.” He turned around to face me. “I do want it. I mean, I do want to make love to you. More than anything.”

“Then what?”

He took a deep breath, and I swore his eyes were moist. It looked like he might cry, and my heart began to break right then and there.

“You won’t be my first,” he whispered. “I...uh...I’m not a virgin.”

We’d talked about exes already, or lack of them. We both were only fifteen...well, almost sixteen, and I was sure I’d be Jeremy’s first. But now he was telling me something different. If I wasn’t his first, who was? And how could he have kept this from me?

“What do ya mean? You said I was your first.”

“You are, Travis.” He stepped closer to me. “I didn’t lie to you. You *are* my first boyfriend. You’re the first person I’ve ever felt like this about. Travis...I, uh...I think I love you.”

I shook my head, not knowing exactly how to respond. He loved me, but he’d lied? I didn’t know whether to be overjoyed or furious. “You’re not making any sense,” I said.

He lowered himself, squatting on the ground in front of me and looked up into my eyes. "I fooled around with another guy when I was in middle school."

This all made no sense. It had taken Jeremy two years to build up the courage to ask me out, and then we'd dated for over three months without going further than second base. And now here he was confessing to doing it with

someone else?

“Jeremy, you...” I didn’t know what to say.

“In the eighth grade, this friend of my sister’s was over at our house. It was kinda obvious he was gay. I mean, he didn’t pretend to be her boyfriend or anything. His name was Marcus, and he was seventeen. We messed around together... he was my first.”

“Okay,” I said. “But you weren’t boyfriends?”

“No, but we did it more than once. I don’t exactly know how to explain it. We weren’t boyfriends, just buddies. You know, like fuck buddies. Travis, I’m sorry. I’m not proud of it.”

“But then, how come you never...”

“Put the moves on you?”

I nodded.

“I don’t know. God, I wanted to so bad, but I was afraid. I didn’t think about you like I did Marcus, and I wanted

us to have something...special.”

It was so much to take in, so weird to discover this person I'd been absolutely crazy about wasn't exactly who I thought he was. “What about since we started dating?” I asked. “Has there been anyone else?”

He shook his head. “No. I swear. Marcus was more or less my first experimentation. I was really just figuring out who I was.”

“Jeremy...” I slid off the

couch to kneel down beside him on the floor. I took both his hands into my own and looked into his eyes. "Jeremy, I wish you had told me."

"I know. I wanted to; I really did. I'm sorry..."

"But it doesn't matter. I don't care about who you were with before me. I just care about now and about our future."

"Really?"

I nodded, my own eyes now

welling with tears. "Because I love you too."

He grabbed hold of me and pulled me into his embrace, not kissing me this time but hugging me fiercely. "I'm so sorry," he whispered, "but there's more."

I pulled back a little and looked him in the eyes. "You can tell me anything."

"I found out a couple months ago."

"You found out what?"

Tears now streamed down Jeremy's face. "I found out Marcus is HIV positive."

* * * * *

Jeremy got a car for his sixteenth birthday. We both were shocked because we'd been excited enough about the fact he'd be getting his license. It wasn't like a brand new car or anything, but it was cool. Jeremy's dad bought it from a

friend, and as we climbed inside I took a deep breath.

“It smells like a new car,” I remarked.

“I know!” Jeremy smiled from ear to ear. “Dad said they had it professionally detailed. Travis, I can’t believe this! I can’t fucking believe I got a fucking new car!” He laid on the horn, beeping it five or six times.

I wanted to kiss him right there but his parents and sisters

were outside the vehicle watching us, all of them cheering and smiling. "I told them," he said as he turned to me.

"You told them?" I wasn't sure what he meant.

"About me."

"About you? Or about us?"

"All of it, Travis. Last night, I told them everything...even about Marcus."

My mouth dropped open.

“Wh-”

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you, but I wanted to talk to you in person. We were up late last night, till like two in the morning. My folks pretty much knew. They figured out a long time ago you and me were more than just friends.”

“And?”

“And they’re cool.” He leaned over and kissed me quickly, then smiled.

“Jeremy, that’s awesome.”

“I know, right? But I made a decision. I wanna be tested.”

I nodded. “Good,” I whispered. “I’ll go with you...if you want.”

“Of course I want.” He took my hand in his. “We’ll go the 26th.”

“And then celebrate your birthday.”

He smiled. “No matter what?”

“No matter what.” I

squeezed his hand.

* * * * *

The lady at the clinic provided us with lots of pamphlets containing helpful information, but we already pretty much knew all that stuff. We'd learned all of it back in eighth grade sex ed. That was the weird thing about it. Jeremy had known about safe sex back then, but he hadn't

practiced it. We discussed it as we waited for the results.

“I was stupid,” he said. “I wanted to be cool, and I was afraid of what Marcus would say.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “You definitely were stupid. But it’s okay. Everyone makes mistakes.”

“It seems like they’re taking forever,” he complained.

“Imagine what it used to be like,” I said. “You used to have

to wait days, sometimes a week or more, for results.”

“That would be horrible.”

We sat alone in the waiting room of the clinic. It seemed like any other doctor’s office, except the pamphlets they had displayed were all about safe sex and family planning. I looked around as the seconds ticked by, and Jeremy was right. It did seem to be taking forever. I started to wonder how I’d react if we got bad

news.

Would it mean I'd have to break up with Jeremy? Would it mean we'd never be able to go all the way with each other? Maybe he'd break up with me out of guilt or something. And I knew what they said about people with HIV being able to live long lives, but still, it was something people died from.

As the door opened and the counselor, Carrie, invited us back to get the results, Jeremy

took hold of my hand. Maybe his heart was beating as fast as mine. Maybe he too had butterflies fluttering in his stomach, but the expression on his face didn't give anything away. He looked straight ahead, very sober, and led me with him to the counselor's office.

She wasted no time in delivering the results as we took our seats. In fact, I don't think I was all the way settled

in my chair when she blurted out, “Your results are negative.”

Jeremy looked at me and smiled broadly, then quickly pulled me into a tight embrace. “Oh, God!” He sighed, and as I pulled back from him I saw the tears in his eyes. “Oh, thank you. What a relief.”

Carrie sat there calmly, her hands folded in her lap. “I’m proud of you for coming in to get tested, Jeremy,” she said

after allowing us both a few moments to compose ourselves. “That was a brave thing to do, but I’d like to discuss with you some ways you can protect yourself in the future.”

“I...uh...I already know all about safe sex, using condoms and stuff.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“I was just stupid. I just...I don’t know. I don’t know why I didn’t use protection.”

“But you plan to do so in the

future?”

We both nodded.
“Definitely.”

* * * * *

Jeremy sat beside me on my bed as I handed him his belated birthday present. He smiled at me, then delivered a kiss in exchange for the small box I offered him. He looked down at the birthday wrapping paper.

“Thanks for not using Christmas paper,” he said.

“I hope you like it.”

He tore open the wrapping and removed the black velvet box, then smiled at me once more before opening it. He held up the necklace and read the inscription:

THE BEGINNING OF
FOREVER

“It’s beautiful,” he said.
“Thank you.” He turned and held up the necklace for me to

place around his neck.

“There’s more,” I whispered, then reached behind me to pick up a second wrapped gift. I tossed it into his lap.

“It’s light,” he said, picking it up and shaking it. I’d finished clasping the necklace, so he turned to face me, tucking one foot beneath himself on the mattress. He tore open the wrapping and smiled devilishly. “A jumbo

pack of colored condoms?”

“And they’re flavored,” I said.

He pulled me into his embrace and delivered a sizzling kiss. “And when do we get to try them out?”

“That’ll be your third present,” I whispered into his ear, then slid off the bed onto my knees and looked up at him, smiling.